

APRIL 24, 1986

Prospects for a good spring are improving in the Shortgrass Country. In the last part of March alone, we caught a 64th, a trace, and a full 1/16 of an inch of rain. Mesquites have leafed out and the low spots have a slight tinge of green. The old ewes that lost their lambs in the February cold spells are putting on weight and the dry cows are on the mend.

This isn't saying that the cows nursing calves aren't doing well. I was looking over a little bunch of Angus cows last week and saw that lice were helping them shed their winter coats. Of course, they looked pretty rough from having to share their blood with the parasites, but under closer examination out in the sunlight, the bare patches of hide and the spots of loose hair had a right healthy look.

I hadn't thought about those old sisters getting lousy. Heel flies had been after them on warm afternoons earlier in the season, and I figured a short legged louse couldn't overtake a cow the way they were scattering all over the hillsides.

Whether the cattle were lousy or not wasn't important. After I went into a straight organic ranching program last fall, I stopped trying to convert 29-cents-a-pound cow beef into \$31 a gallon insecticide. Once the bank and I worked out how much air and water and salt were going to furnish our cattle, whatever health or parasite problems the herd developed that weren't curable by wood ashes or rock salt were going to go unchecked.

At the peak of the lice and heel fly epidemic, I considered using my granddad's remedy of pouring burnt crankcase oil around the water troughs to make the cattle's legs slick enough that the flies and lice would at least have to look for a landing place. But on an outfit that runs sheep, too, you have to watch out for such grand schemes as that or you'll have every wool buyer in Boston falling over in a stumbling fit.

Without adding to our trouble, we already had some ewes slipping their fleeces. I wasn't able to explain why. Most every range plant we raise will take the sheep's lives and leave the wool to line the crows' and ravens' nests. High fever is the most likely cause of a woolie peeling off slick, but the only excuse I could think of for one of them to run a fever was for her to find out she was going to have to nurse her lamb full term.

What I am afraid has happened is the ewes have been watching the cattle gather around the feed grounds with such devotion that they've come under the same spell. I know bird dog owners who claim that unless they get their kennels to lots of field trials, they'll find their trainers sleeping around on the sunny side of the barns just like those old spotted dogs did when they got too idle to do anything but scratch and hover for more food.

So I think when the sheep saw the old cows losing their hair, they thought it was another way of reducing the responsibility of life. But if we could get some good spring moisture, we wouldn't have to run them in the same pasture with the cattle. I hate to think of having a heard of sheep as spoiled as our cattle are.